

WASHINGTON POST
18 March 1987

A21.

J Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

The Republicans Aren't Ready Yet

NASHUA, N.H.—When George Bush used his preferential status at the year's first full-fledged Republican presidential cattle show to deliver a yawner in praise of the CIA, it was the finishing touch on a weekend demonstration of how unready the party is for 1988.

Since the vice president used his political power to demand and secure privileges denied six other hopefuls at the northeastern regional party conference, the prospect of his Saturday luncheon speech excited speculation. It did prove a surprise. Sometimes labeled the résumé candidate, Bush devoted his full 20 minutes to one item on that résumé: his year as Gerald Ford's CIA director.

That demonstrated fragility and brittleness in the front-runner's campaign, but his pursuers were not measurably more impressive. Sen. Robert J. Dole reflected organizational start-up problems with an erratic, unimpressive showing. Rep. Jack Kemp was better than that but not good enough to seize imaginations. The also-rans showed why they are also-rans.

Thus, what could have been a disaster for the vice president instead proved his challengers are not ready for prime time. In the very city where Bush's insensitivity during the famous 1980 debate clinched Ronald Reagan's nomination, his competitors failed to exploit Bush's ham-handed power politics.

Gov. John Sununu, Bush's chairman in this first primary state, muscled State Chairman Elsie Vartanian into giving the vice president the choice luncheon spot while the others were herded into a Friday-night ghetto limited to five minutes each. The Bush campaign peremptorily assumed the party's function, changing the menu and physical arrangements. Sununu was a palpably pro-Bush moderator as he introduced the Little Six for their speeches.

But nobody took advantage, especially Dole. While moving up quickly, the Senate minority leader still has not sorted out personal disputes between his backers. That suggests a possibly endemic weakness in his political style, as did other aspects of his Nashua appearance.

He came here after first threaten-

ing to boycott the Bush coup, but unlike other members of the Little Six, he skipped the Saturday panel discussions. He discarded prepared remarks Friday night, reverted to form by zinging Bush and filled most of his five minutes with a tired anecdote of Kansas politics drawn from his basic speech. He then left the room, skipping the keynote address by a non-candidate: Secretary of Education William J. Bennett. "Bob better decide whether he wants to tell jokes or be a candidate," a potential New Hampshire supporter told us.

That opened the door for a virtuoso performance badly needed by Kemp. But while sounding more like a presidential candidate than his rivals, he emulated Dole in throwing away pre-

pared remarks (which stressed social issues, partly to woo New Hampshire's uncommitted Sen. Gordon Humphrey). Kemp, though forceful, affirmed accusations that he remains Jackie-one-note by calling for a flat tax and a sound dollar.

Other cattle show entrants ranged from poor to adequate, generating a momentary presidential boomlet for Bennett, who had time enough for a real speech and revived the dozing audience. This raised expectations that Bush might make his solo appearance Saturday a tour de force, perhaps asking members of the Little Six still in Nashua to join him on the dais.

Although nothing so astute was contemplated, what he did do was hardly less unusual. His strategists were trying to establish Bush credentials, independent of the Reagan presidency and without any hint of disloyalty, by delivering an encomium on the CIA. The resulting speech was most odd for a political event, only twice evoking applause from an audience packed with Bush backers.

His performance shows not much has changed in Bush's front-runner strategy. His handlers welcome the addition of moderate supporters of Howard Baker, now departed from presidential candidate ranks, to his hard-core party faithful and figure that is enough for the nomination.

That explains the question asked us, by Bush's principal political aide, Lee Atwater, about his chief's absence Fri-

day night: "What good would he have done himself up there with everybody else?" Atwater last month asked nearly the same rhetorical question about Bush's absence from the Conservative Political Action Conference.

That mind-set might move Bush toward the nomination by using political muscle and a polished résumé, while he ignores fair treatment for his opponents and a political vision for himself. But it may be a formula for disaster if one of the Little Six breaks out of the pack.

©1987, North America Syndicate, Inc.